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RUHBBEA/CG THIRD FSSG CAMP KINSER JA
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RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC
RUEHKSO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO PRIORITY 0174
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0472
RHMFISS/USARPAC G5 FT SHAFTER HI
RHMFISS/USPACOM REP GUAM ISLAND GU
RUALBCC/YOKOTA AB HQ USFJ

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 08 NAHA 000103

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/26/2031

TAGS: [MARR](#) [PINS](#) [JA](#) [CH](#) [TW](#)

SUBJECT: OKINAWAN EXCEPTIONALISM: THE CHINA THREAT OR LACK THEREOF

REF: A. A. TOKYO 1301

[1](#)B. B. TOKYO 1153

[1](#)C. C. EMBASSY TOKYO TRANSLATION OF FEBRUARY 24 SANKEI SHIMBUN ARTICLE.

[1](#)D. D. FUKUOKA 17

[1](#)E. E. NAGOYA 11

[1](#)F. F. TOKYO 822

NAHA 00000103 001.2 OF 008

CLASSIFIED BY: Thomas G. Reich, Consul General, Consulate
General Naha, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Despite China's rapidly expanding economic and military activities, including in waters near Okinawa, Okinawans claim they do not share America's or Japan's sense of threat from China. While many mainland Japanese officials and

influentials say they recognize China as a potential threat to regional security and stability, even most conservative Okinawans do not believe a Chinese threat to Japan (or elsewhere) necessarily means a threat to Okinawa. Many Okinawans identify with China culturally and believe China sees them as a separate people from the Japanese. Some also say Okinawa, over the centuries, has received better treatment from China than from Japan or the United States. These attitudes combine to produce an Okinawan perspective that is markedly different from that of mainland Japan, and which is a factor in local attitudes toward U.S. military bases in Okinawa. End summary.

China Rising

12. (SBU) In recent years, China's economic expansion and growing military capabilities have attracted a great deal of attention in Japan, although somewhat less in Okinawa. The two leading Okinawan newspapers generally appear reluctant to feature articles about the potential negative impacts on regional security associated with China's rise, mostly because the newspapers fear this line of thought will serve as an implicit justification for the continued existence of U.S. military bases on the island.

13. (SBU) Nevertheless, Okinawans who make the effort to read mainland Japanese newspapers can find ample coverage of Japan's concerns. Some widely reported Chinese activities have a very direct connection to Okinawa. For example, Japan, China and Taiwan have competing claims to an island chain 250 miles west of Okinawa, known as the Senkakus in Japan and Diaoyu in China. The governments of Japan and China have disputed the islands' sovereignty for years and more recently have both made moves to develop undersea resources near them (see, e.g., refs. A, B). The media have reported China has erected drilling platforms in the disputed territory.

14. (SBU) China has also stepped up military air and sea activities in the area, prompting Japanese Self Defense Forces to respond. According to national broadcaster NHK, Japan Air Self Defense Forces scrambled to intercept Chinese military aircraft above or near the East China Sea 30 times between April and September 2005, more than twice as often as they did in all of 2004. Chinese maritime activity also occasionally makes the news. The November 2004 Chinese submarine incursion into Japanese waters within Okinawa Prefecture drew a rare Chinese apology for a "technical error." The mainland Japanese media have suggested this was not the only Chinese submarine intrusion near Okinawa.

Different Perspectives of "Mainland" Japanese and Okinawans

15. (C) In mainland Japan, concern over China's military buildup is frequently aired. For example, in January the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) General Affairs Chairman Akio Kuma noted that if China chose to swallow up Taiwan, it would be easy enough for it to swallow up Okinawa, too, in the absence of U.S. forces. In February the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) issued a statement that it was "inevitable that China's military buildup and its moves to line up marine interests from the viewpoint of the Japanese people are recognized as an actual threat to Japan" (ref. C).

16. (U) Typical of many Japanese academics' views was a February 9 article by (Japan's) National Defense University Professor Tomohide Murai stating that the most efficient way for the United States to project power throughout the world was to link with regional partners, and that Japan, by its very location, was a key partner in the Pacific. Murai noted the Chinese recognized the strategic importance of Okinawa, calling it (as does the United States) the "keystone of the Pacific."

17. (SBU) In Okinawa, however, many - probably most - residents have a substantially different assessment of China. In general, Okinawans perceive little potential threat from China; many people here note China and the Ryukyu Kingdom had peaceful relations for centuries prior to the 19th Century Meiji Restoration in Japan. To be sure, there are Okinawans who are as concerned about China's destabilizing possibilities as are many mainlanders, but this is not the prevailing view on the island.

18. (C) As vignettes of Okinawa's relaxed attitude toward China, we note the following conversations. During a September 2005 office call, reformist Ginowan City Mayor Yoichi Iha told us he believed China posed no threat to Okinawa. In October 2005 Kin Town Mayor Gibu underscored his support for the U.S.-Japan alliance but complained the GOJ had never explained what threat, exactly, the alliance deterred. In March, former Socialist Party Diet Member and candidate for Okinawa City mayor Mitsuko Tomon made the same complaint.

19. (C) We asked why a look at a map of the region surrounding Okinawa and current stories regarding China's expansion didn't provide Okinawans enough information for them to judge for themselves. Tomon replied the GOJ and USG were like the boy who cried wolf, pointing to China and claiming that something awful might happen, but nothing ever did. Okinawans were undisturbed, Tomon claimed, by Chinese incursions. Chinese fishing boats crossing the sea boundary did not affect Okinawan fisheries as Okinawans worked only in its inner seas. In a separate conversation, he Okinawan Federation of Fisheries echoed Tomon's claim, but added that their members avoided the Senkakus because they were "politically difficult." The Chinese might be drilling near the Senkakus, and claim the Senkakus for themselves, Tomon noted, but these were essentially peaceful activities for the GOJ to settle. Because of Okinawa's history as the Ryukyu Kingdom, it had a very different view of China than did the Japanese mainland. Historically speaking, Tomon commented, Japan and the United States had been more harmful to Okinawa than China had ever been.

A Ryukyuan History Primer

10. (U) By entering into close trading relationships with both China and Japan in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Ryukyu Kingdom enjoyed a lengthy period of prosperity in the years before 1609. As George Kerr notes in his book Okinawa: The History of an Island People, "the islands were independent. They were in constant communication and at peace with neighboring states. Okinawans were in the happy position of freedom to adopt what they wanted, and to remain indifferent - or at best mildly curious - about foreign artifacts and institutions for which they felt no pressing need. China loomed as the neighbor of unquestioned superiority, and Okinawans were in close and constant communication with Japan, but were overwhelmed by neither." Many Okinawans today regard this period as the Golden Age of their history, and view it as a basis for their belief that China sees Okinawa a place entirely separate from Japan.

11. (U) The Golden Age ended in 1609, when the southernmost clan in mainland Japan (the Satsumas of southern Kyushu) sent an army to assert control over Okinawa and extracted increasingly burdensome tributes. The Satsumas then took over the lucrative trade with China through Okinawa, continuing it despite the Tokugawa Shogunate's closed country (sakoku) policy.

12. (U) After Commodore Perry and his black ships helped trigger the Meiji Restoration, Japan began vigorously securing and expanding its borders. In 1872 Japan formally abolished the Ryukyu Kingdom and annexed Okinawa, over Chinese protests. Okinawa pleaded with China and the United States to intervene. Four-party discussions dragged on for decades until the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, which settled the issue in Japan's favor as far as the western powers were concerned.

13. (U) Japan instituted a top-down assimilation program for

Okinawa that gained momentum when met by a bottom-up assimilation movement following Japan's success in the Sino-Japanese War. Practical-minded Okinawans became convinced they would benefit from closer identification with Japan. Early editorials of the Ryukyu Shimpo, dating as far back as 1893, asserted that Okinawa could develop only by fully assimilating with Japan.

¶14. (U) Over the following 50 years, many Okinawans saw military service, including during the battle for Okinawa, as a chance to prove they were true Japanese. However, the battle, which killed perhaps a third of the Okinawan population, came as a shock to most of the survivors, who experienced or heard stories of atrocities against Okinawans by Japanese troops. In the years after the war, a home-grown historical interpretation of the battle took solid root in Okinawa, which holds that Tokyo had always intended to sacrifice Okinawa in a battle designed to consume as many U.S. forces as possible, to stall and weaken an eventual attack on the mainland.

¶15. (U) The United States directly governed Okinawa through a military high commissioner from 1945 to 1972, 20 years longer than the rest of Japan. During this period, U.S. forces forcibly seized land for bases. By the early 1960s, a movement advocating reversion to Japan began among Okinawans, leading to large-scale demonstrations against the U.S. administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Okinawa reverted to Japan May 15, 1972.

¶16. (SBU) The reunion was a victory for all Okinawans (though many were dismayed at the remaining numbers of U.S. facilities and forces), and anti-U.S. protests were dramatically reduced following reversion. With reversion, the GOJ sharply increased infrastructure development, and the general standard of living greatly improved. However, in the years since 1972, many Okinawans have called for lessening the island's economic dependence on GOJ transfer payments. Okinawa remains the poorest prefecture in Japan, with the highest unemployment rate in Japan, and many argue that Okinawa needs to become more economically independent.

Okinawan Analysis: Split Identity, Affinity with China

¶17. (SBU) The above history still shapes Okinawans' world views, including their sense of identity. In December 2005 the University of the Ryukyus announced the results of a telephone survey of Okinawans, in which 40% of respondents, when asked how they identified themselves, said they were Okinawan. A smaller percentage said they were both Okinawan and Japanese (36%), and just over one in five identified themselves as Japanese (21%).

¶18. (SBU) This history also shapes how Okinawans view the GOJ and actions that are presented in the world press as provocations to China, most notably visits by the Prime Minister to Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine. While many mainland Japanese are reportedly uncomfortable with the visits, if push comes to shove between China and Japan, opinion polls show that most side with Japan's right to do as it pleases. We believe most Okinawans side with China. Typical of this attitude is Masaru Yamada, treasurer of Okinawa City, who recently criticized Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. He told us he doubted China would ever accept Koizumi's explanations of the visits, any more than he himself did. Okinawans and Chinese held similar views of the visits, he explained, because they shared the experience of having been "prisoners of war" of the Japanese.

¶19. (U) Local newspaper editorials have also pointed to the Yasukuni visits as unnecessary barriers to bilateral and regional cooperation that the GOJ could, and should, remove. Although an exaggeration, a recent Ryukyu Shimpo article reporting on the study of Okinawan identity concluded with a warning that GOJ policies, particularly as they related to bases and transformation, could influence Okinawans' opinions on whether to remain part of Japan.

¶20. (SBU) Many Okinawans believe that China sees them differently, and more warmly, than it sees the rest of Japan. They point out that Taipei International Airport, when posting place names in Chinese characters, lists flights to/from "Ryukyu," not Okinawa. A May 2005 Ryukyu Shimpo report claimed that, because of Okinawa's history, it could become an intermediary peacefully linking China and Taiwan. By offering an independent, international contribution, Okinawa could renounce its title of "(strategic) keystone of the Pacific" and become a "keystone of goodwill." A June 2005 Ryukyu Shimpo opinion piece contrasted the hospitality the Chinese granted Okinawa Governor Inamine and his party when they visited Beijing with Beijing's snubbing of PM Koizumi. "The extreme attention provided Okinawa, with its deep historical connection to China, was conspicuous in its contrast. To look at it the other way around, it was an intense dig at the GOJ," commented the Shimpo.

¶21. (SBU) Chinese Ambassador to Japan Ki Ou (phonetic from Japanese pronunciation) visited Okinawa April 24, on a trip sponsored by the OPG, Okinawa Economic Association, and Okinawa Visitors and Convention Bureau. Ou masterfully played to Okinawans' sense of exceptionalism and desire for a new golden era of lucrative Sino-Okinawan relations. Ou cited the historical and cultural links between China and the Ryukyus and said he immediately felt comfortable on this first visit to Okinawa. Over the past 25 years China's economic expansion had far outpaced its military expansion, Ou claimed, and its defense capabilities were reasonable for a country of China's area and population. China alone, of the five original nuclear powers, had offered to eliminate all nuclear weapons if the others would only agree to do the same. Okinawa and China should again travel together the path of peaceful development, Ou stressed, and tens of thousands of Chinese tourists annually were sure to follow.

Caveats

¶22. (SBU) Okinawa's exceptionalism is not based entirely on history and feeling; it is used to practical effect. Okinawans claiming to feel no threat from China often use this to bolster arguments that bases should be eliminated from Okinawa. For example, when asked specifically about Chinese military activities near Okinawa, such as the November 2004 submarine incursion, former Diet member Tomon grudgingly admitted that the incident was regrettable. She hastened to add, however, that it alone did not justify the concentration of U.S. forces and facilities in Okinawa.

¶23. (SBU) The claim of exceptionalism is useful even for conservatives who support the alliance and those who profit from our base presence. Conservative Okinawans could be seen as playing good cop to reformists' bad cop, in order to squeeze the maximum concessions from the GOJ and USG. A number of Okinawan leaders probably assert this exceptionalism because they believe it useful in leveraging concessions from the USG and GOJ in return for Okinawan shouldering the burden of U.S. military bases.

¶24. (SBU) Economic self-interest also helps explain Okinawa's keenness to engage China. In this, Okinawan governments and businesses have motives similar to those of other provinces now scrambling to find new sources of income as Koizumi's reforms reduce the outward flow of GOJ largess. The former Secretary General of the LDP in Okinawa, Kenjiro Nishida, told us his main motivation for founding the Okinawa-China Friendship Exchange Association was to boost the number of Chinese tourists to Okinawa. He noted his Chinese counterparts met him more than halfway, being well funded by their Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ConGen Fukuoka and Consulate Nagoya have identified identical local motives to engage China, as well as signs of China's welcoming this engagement (Refs. F, G). The Chinese leadership may remember Sun Tzu's maxim, "when he is united, divide him." Regardless of how cool relations are between Tokyo and Beijing, there is no evidence this has had an effect on Okinawa's ties with China.

¶25. (SBU) That being said, Okinawan businesspeople whose interests directly conflict with China are not as relaxed about Chinese expansion. Local developer Tadashi Zayasu told us he owned part of an interest in a drilling application in the East China Sea near the Senkaku Islands. Zayasu said the GOJ had approved a drilling application filed by the partnership, d.b.a. Teikoku Oil. The application was filed in 1970, but the GOJ did not approve it until July 2005. Zayasu mused that the GOJ seemed bent on helping the Chinese at the expense of Okinawans. Why else, he asked, would the GOJ have funded a Chinese pipeline to support their exploitation of the fields while sitting on a Japanese company's application for over thirty years?

Comment/Conclusion

¶26. (SBU) The above caveats notwithstanding, Okinawa's sense of affinity with China and feeling of distance from Japanese interests give this place a unique perspective on Sino-Japanese relations, and it shapes the local environment for U.S. military bases. Due in part to this, many Okinawans are unconvinced that our bases in Okinawa are needed to defend Japan -- or at least not to defend Okinawa. Some in the GOJ leadership may value the domestic political benefits of appealing to Japanese nationalism over the benefits of improved Sino-Japanese relations (ref. F). The Yasukuni visits, and Chinese reactions to them, are having the opposite effect on attitudes in Okinawa. Such acts strengthen the sense in Okinawa that the LDP leadership, and the GOJ more broadly, ignore the victims of militarism. Okinawans' cultural identification with China, combined with a sense of serial betrayal by the GOJ, fuels local suspicion of GOJ motives on current political-military issues.
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